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Introduction to Visualizing Russia: Fedor Solntsev and Crafting a National Past

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FEDOR SOLNTSEV AND CRAFTING THE IMAGE OF A RUSSIAN NATIONAL PAST: THE CONTEXT

Wendy Salmond and Cynthia Hyla Whittaker

Visualizing Russia in the twenty-first century is an exercise that leans on indelible images of the pre-revolutionary past. We conjure up gleaming gilt, vibrant colors, onion domes, icons, tsarist regalia, pointed headdresses, peasant blouses, fairy tale illustrations, the sets and costumes of the Ballets Russes. We recognize in all these images manifestations of *le style russe* or *russskii stil'*, the Russian style that has so captivated the world's imagination since the mid-nineteenth century. But as late as 1825 the phrase seemed something of an oxymoron.

This book elaborates the origins of the Russian style in the 1830s and 1840s and celebrates the seminal role that Fedor Grigorevich Solntsev (1801-1892) played in its development. Soviet art historians relegated this pioneering artist-archaeologist-ethnographer-restorer-iconographer to obscurity, since the many facets of his talent expressed a deep belief in Orthodoxy and an unswerving devotion to the tsarist monarchy. The neglect continues even two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, with only a few exceptions.¹ *Visualizing Russia* offers a wealth of evidence to support Solntsev's rightful position at the forefront of the movement that crafted the image of a Russian national past.

The Romantic search for a national past was a European preoccupation in the early decades of the nineteenth century and nowhere more so than in Russia. The legendary date for the founding of the Russian state was 867 c.e., after which Kievan Rus' gained stature internationally, having received its Orthodox religion and much of its culture from the Byzantine Empire. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the Mongols imposed their rule, cutting Russians off from their former ties. Gradually, a new state arose around a new religious and

¹ For instance, an otherwise superb book makes no mention of Solntsev: Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, eds., *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven, CT, 2008). Russians have naturally taken the lead in his rehabilitation: Evgenia Kirichenko, *Russian Design and the Fine Arts, 1750-1917* (NY, 1991); M. M. Evtushenko, "Akademik F. G. Solntsev (1801-1892) i ego vklad v osvoenie drevnerusskogo kul'turnogo nasledia," Ph.D. diss., Hermitage, 2007. In the West, Anne Odom acknowledged Solntsev's importance in "Fedor Solntsev, the Kremlin Service, and the Origins of the Russian Style," *Hillwood Studies*, no. 1 (Fall 1991), pp. 1-4. The comprehensiveness of his achievements was first explored in an exhibition at the New York Public Library, "The Art and Impact of Fedor Solntsev," curated by Wendy Salmond with Edward Kasinec and Robert Davis (March 2 – June 16, 2007).

political capital, Moscow. Muscovy or Muscovite Russia began to renew relations with the outside world but remained an eastern, exotic, sacerdotal realm, backward in the eyes of the West.

Peter the Great chafed at Muscovy's image and turned his back on it. Once he assumed full power in the 1690s, he aimed to create a modern Russia and mold it into an equal political and cultural partner with the leading European nations. In pursuit of this goal Peter established an empire, secularized his power, and modernized institutions with a far-reaching program that went far to westernize the state and transform the elites into Russian Europeans. Catherine the Great continued this process, and Russia had never been nor would ever be so much a part of the West as during her reign. Europeanization resulted in nothing less than a cultural revolution that caused two deep fissures: a break with traditions that dated back to the ninth century; and a break between the westernized urban elites and a peasantry untouched by modernity.

Events at the turn of the century brought Peter's and Catherine's innovations into question and set off an ongoing debate between Slavophiles, who cherished the pre-Petrine past, and Westernizers, who championed the tenets of European modernity. The bloody episodes of the French Revolution along with Napoleon's invasion of Russia tarnished the glow of Western innovations and their generally uncritical acceptance by the elite. At the same time, the defeat of the French Emperor in the Patriotic War elevated the status of the common people, or *narod*, by demonstrating that they could shape Russia's destiny. Once its troops led the allied army into Paris in 1814, the nation emerged unquestionably as a great European power. But it did not have a great or even distinct native culture or history that could resonate both with elites and *narod*. Nikolai Karamzin had famously said, "We became citizens of the world but ceased...to be citizens of Russia. The fault is Peter's." Karamzin began to fill the cultural gap with his *History of the Russian State* (1816-29), revealing the richness of the country's past that Peter had shunted aside in favor of a generalized Western identity. The historian's discoveries of this new Russian world—for which he was likened to Christopher Columbus—resulted in an unprecedented sense of national uniqueness and patriotic pride.

In Russia and throughout Europe, the post-Napoleonic era sparked a surge of nationalism and the flowering of Romanticism, challenging the universalism and classicism of the previous century. The focus now centered on the unique population, history, and culture of each individual nation. From London to St. Petersburg, a fascination with the folk and bygone eras

encouraged the new sciences of archaeology and ethnography and prompted an urgent desire to possess a documented history. Scientists embarked on expeditions, and the accompanying artists produced richly illustrated volumes of antiquities, monuments, and ornament, which became an indispensable link to the distant past and reflected the nationalistic fervor of the times. The recent invention of chromolithography meant that, for the first time, these images could be widely disseminated in vivid color, and their publication was seen as a patriotic act of public enlightenment.

The new mood of Romantic Nationalism found its Eden in the Middle Ages, which had long been scorned as unworthy of attention. Now, medieval revivals—as varied as the emerging nationalist movements they accompanied—sprang up across Europe along with clear political undertones. In England, Germany, France, and the United States, artists like Augustus W.N. Pugin and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc looked to the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages to create a Gothic Revival evoking a bygone idyll of Christian faith and social stability. For the artist-archaeologists of Scandinavia, Ireland, and Central and Eastern Europe, forms borrowed from Celtic, Viking, and other cultures became synonymous with independence from foreign oppression. Motifs like the Gothic pointed arch and the Celtic interlace, deployed in full knowledge of their political significance, became the emblems of a new national and visual language.

Solntsev's gifts exactly suited the spirit of the age, with its combination of patriotic nostalgia, religious sensibility, and scientific objectivity. Although he never left Russia and worked in isolation from artists abroad, like them he intuitively understood the power of ancient artifacts to shape a coherent national identity. Sifting through the multiple layers of distant history—Greek, Viking, Byzantine, Turkic, Mongol, and Slav—he wove the fragments he found into a single image of Russia that has proved remarkably enduring.

Solntsev's father, born an estate serf but working in St. Petersburg as a theatre cashier, recognized his son's talent and enrolled him in the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1815. He graduated nine years later, having won two gold medals, one for his depiction of a peasant family, even at a time when genre painting was considered inferior to grand historical canvases. While still a student Solntsev attracted the attention of Aleksei Olenin, president of the Academy of Arts and an eminent artist, archaeologist, and ethnographer with close ties to the throne. In Olenin's home the young man met the leading cultural figures of the day, including Alekandr

Pushkin, Russia's "national poet," who also reflected the spirit of the age by creating Russia's modern literary language and finding inspiration in Russian folk tales. Olenin's dream was to rescue from oblivion and to document ancient Russian artifacts and monuments—meaning items dating anytime prior to 1700—and publish them for the benefit of the artistic community and the public at large. In an era prior to photography, the archaeological and ethnographic expeditions which Olenin had in mind required an accomplished illustrator, and he found his man in Solntsev, who had been recognized early on for his powers of observation and the precision of his draftsmanship. In fact, when the professor of perspective at the Academy of Arts, Maksim Vorob'ev, paid a visit to Olenin's study, he tried to pick up a gold plaque that fascinated him, only to discover that it was a watercolor by Solntsev. While the artist copied from "nature," he lent such vitality to the objects that they acquired more life than the original.

From 1829 until his death in 1843, Olenin trained and closely supervised Solntsev, instructing him in great detail what and how to paint. The artist-archaeologist first drew the Riazan Gold, a hoard of thirteenth-century artifacts discovered seven years earlier. Solntsev was next given the Herculaean task of depicting "the mores, habits, and costume of the Russian people from the sixth to the eighteenth centuries," in the process collecting historical, archaeological, and ethnographic information for each artifact. To this endeavor, Solntsev would dedicate the whole of his life. Beginning in 1830 and for nearly the next twenty-five years, each summer took Solntsev to Russia's oldest cities and monasteries located in and around Orel, Vladimir, Novgorod, Pskov, Torzhok, Vitebsk, Suzdal, Izborsk, Smolensk, Iur'ev-Polskii, and Tver to record their architecture and their decorative, and applied arts. However, the majority of his work was accomplished in the cathedrals and palaces of the Moscow Kremlin. In particular, he began the systematic examination of objects in the Kremlin Armory, an integral part of the New Kremlin Palace and a museum filled with the relics and treasures of the Russian past, including chronicles about which Solntsev also became expert. Thousands of drawings of tsarist regalia, ecclesiastical vestments and vessels, and military dress resulted from his visits?.

After the death of Olenin, Emperor Nicholas I personally supervised Solntsev's labors. From boyhood, the tsar displayed an interest in medieval/pre-Petrine Russian culture and from the early years of his reign he worked closely with Olenin on archaeological and ethnographic projects that would proclaim the existence of a distinctive Russian art and inspire contemporary creations in the Russian style. The tsar's intense interest in fostering an official national culture

was expressed through innumerable decrees, ranging from the protection of historic monuments and bringing the Academy of Arts under his personal purview to a requirement that women at court wear Russian dress. Nicholas had admired Solntsev's drawings from the outset and grasped their ideological and political importance. The tsar channeled the artist's work into projects that glorified the Russian state, thereby creating one of the first visual foundations for the doctrine of Official Nationality and establishing the canonical image of Russia as a powerful empire shaped by the ideals of "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality." With such patronage, Solntsev was able to carry on his work systematically and with no interruption.

A significant aspect of Nicholas's concept of the state centered on what he thought were its Byzantine or "Greek" origins, dating back to Russia's adoption of Eastern rite Christianity during the Kievan era. The Byzantine Empire had collapsed in 1453, overrun by the Muslim Ottomans, and Russia remained the only independent Orthodox state in Europe, leading to the claim that Moscow was the successor to Constantinople and perhaps even Rome. Closer in time, Nicholas's grandmother, Catherine the Great, envisioned the "Greek Project," whereby the former Byzantine empire and capital would once again become Orthodox as well as a Russian puppet state; Nicholas's older brother was named Constantine and was taught Greek in anticipation of the event. Nicholas himself saw the Byzantine form of government as an ideal absolute monarchy and the font of Russian national culture, seeing as alien the burgeoning democracies of the West. Thus, the tsar lavished attention on Kievan artifacts as well as on the complex of buildings within the Moscow Kremlin, which had been neglected as the symbol of Russia's past since the reforms of Peter the Great. As a result, what came to be celebrated as the Russian style in the Nicholaevan era was referred to as the Russo-Byzantine or simply Byzantine style.

By providing palpable links to Kievan and Muscovite historic figures, dress, and events, Solntsev's drawings affirmed the historical, cultural, and dynastic basis of tsarist rule. An overwhelming emphasis on the hierarchy, symbols, and rites of the Orthodox Church and the Romanov dynasty served to bind the peoples of the Russian Empire together around a single "Great Russian idea," often expressed in the malleable term *narodnost'* (nationality or pertaining to or embodying the people). Miracle-working icons and imperial regalia reinforced Russia's claim to succeed the Byzantine Empire. A diversity of images, ranging from the helmet believed to have belonged to Prince Aleksandr Nevskii to the gold plate of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich,

stressed ancestral links, while reinforcing the Eastern sources of much Russian culture. A milestone in creating a modern Russian art from historic relics was Solntsev's design for the Kremlin dinner service for five hundred, which would function at coronations and foreign diplomatic events as an embodiment of the national character. The ornamental motifs were widely imitated.

The cult of medieval monuments was central to the imaginings of Romantic Nationalism. As the sites of momentous events and valiant deeds, cathedrals, palaces, and fortresses were imbued with the ghosts of the past; they also functioned as historic shrines, stages on which rulers and people could gather to enact rituals of nationhood. In Russia, as elsewhere in Europe, it was a short step from recording the remains of ancient buildings to restoring them to their former glory. Since the late seventeenth century, the cathedrals and palaces of medieval Moscow, Kiev, and other old Slavic cities had been neglected, unsympathetically modernized, or demolished, and their ancient frescoes repainted or even plastered over. As the tsar's trusted servant in all matters involving Russian art and archaeology, in the 1840s and 1850s Solntsev found himself a pioneer in a nascent historic preservation movement.

Since the previous reign, efforts had been made to restore the entire Kremlin complex. In furthering the project, Nicholas appointed Konstantin Ton as chief architect and Solntsev as chief artist. For two years, in the late 1830s, Solntsev designed parquet, carpets, doors, stained glass, tile stoves, and window frames for Ton's Great Kremlin Palace, which was built to replace the one burned down in 1812. Basing his designs on the churches and palaces in the greater Moscow area, in 1837 Solntsev also undertook a major restoration of the royal apartments in the Kremlin's Terem Palace, which had fallen into near ruin. Using surviving fragments as a guide, he re-created the interior decorations and furnished the rooms with period pieces, thereby creating an essential element of the Russian style in interior decoration: covering extensive surfaces solidly and lavishly with ornamental motifs and sacred figures of the type found in frescoes and icons.

In the 1840s, the tsar dispatched Solntsev to Kiev for restoration work and the copying of antiquities. The restoration of the eleventh-century Cathedral of St. Sofiia was part of a larger state project to secure/consolidate Imperial Russia's claim to the patrimony of Kievan Rus'. After discovering the original Byzantine frescoes and mosaics beneath a layer of later plaster, Solntsev was entrusted by Nicholas with overseeing the restoration of the interior. The artist

pioneered the technique of removing subsequent restorations layer by layer, recognizing the importance of preserving the historical integrity of art and architecture. However, at this time in the history of preservation, accuracy was not necessarily the aim but rather an “inspired, creative reinterpretation” of the past as it might have been and as distilled through the poetic vision of the artist.² In other words, like Viollet-le-Duc Solntsev did not consider himself to be a mere copyist, but one whose imagination re-created the past. It goes without saying that future preservationists would roundly criticize both men for their “barbaric” treatment of antiquities.

In the 1840s, the very busy Solntsev also began working for the Holy Synod—the group of twelve prelates, chaired by a lay over-procurator, who administered the Russian Orthodox Church. Having undergone a kind of “religious resurrection” during a trip to Novgorod in 1833, Solntsev accepted these obligations as a sacred duty. He performed a variety of tasks: repairing a wall painting at a cathedral in Novgorod, illustrating prayer books for members of the imperial family, designing communion cloths, and drawing church calendars so elaborate that some consisted of 4,800 figures of saints. Solntsev’s motifs were based on his discoveries of objects found in sacristies throughout old Russia, and his designs were widely imitated, thereby creating a kind of ecclesiastical Russian style.

Solntsev was equally influential in the field of icon painting at a time when the Byzantine canon was increasingly threatened by the influx of Roman Catholic elements. Solntsev instituted a course in icon painting and restoration at the St. Petersburg Theological Seminary that was taught from 1844 to 1867 and was imitated in seminaries throughout the empire. He was one of the few contemporary artists competent to comment on and offer reforms in this area. As a painter professionally trained at the Academy of Arts, he understood the technical details and had an appreciation for academic aesthetic norms; at the same time, as a devout Orthodox Christian, he was conversant with the canonical criteria needed to ensure that an icon was worthy of veneration; in addition, his archaeological/ethnographical work meant that he had full knowledge of the traditional composition of Russian icons. His expertise with icons also resulted in his being appointed to a commission to strengthen Orthodoxy in the southwest territories, lands absorbed into Russia after the Partitions of Poland. He designed over two hundred iconostases both for existing Orthodox churches that had fallen into disrepair and for new churches constructed for Russians who settled in the territories as part of the overall imperial

² Kirichenko, *Russian Design*, 80.

project to introduce Russianness throughout the empire.

During all of his travels, Solntsev also worked to compile a dictionary or pictorial encyclopedia of Russian costume as part of the effort to underscore the ethnically heterogeneous nature of the Russian empire. Instigated by Olenin, the project reflected the Romantic spirit of the era that paid attention to those of humble as well as royal birth. In the Russian case, the peasant was further elevated as a source of authenticity, untouched by Europeanization. Even before Solntsev, the rich diversity of ethnic and regional dress of “the peoples of Russia” had been a subject of fascination since the reign of Empress Anna Ioannovna. Some of the most widely circulated and copied images of the empire’s ethnically diverse population date to 1777, when German historian and ethnographer Johann Gottlieb Georgi published his *Description of All the Peoples Inhabiting the Russian State*. As interest in ethnography and folklore increased, the regional dress of each province became as emblematic as its coat of arms.

Solntsev’s portfolio of exquisite watercolor drawings, entitled *Costumes of the Russian State (Odezhdy russkago gosudarstva)* and originally commissioned by Olenin, was never published but remains a monument to old Russia in its own right.³ On his annual travels, he took the time to depict the attire of royals, boyars, and merchants but gave special attention to traditions still practiced among the peasant population, whose lives had been least affected by the influx of Western customs in the eighteenth century. The embroidered costumes and crescent-shaped headdresses of peasant women and girls were particularly emphasized, as the embodiment of ancient tradition. Solntsev’s mission had a particular sense of urgency, since folk traditions were already beginning to disappear from the countryside as modern means of communication spread.

Solntsev’s greatest achievement was to demonstrate that a rich native culture had existed prior to the eighteenth century, when West European customs were adopted by the Russian elite. At the time, this seemed a shocking revelation. As recently as 1836, a radical Westernizer, Petr Chaadaev published an article contending that Russia’s past had no value. Like Karamzin in history and Pushkin in folklore, Solntsev succeeded in refuting the charge by recording the material culture of early Russia in all its diversity, from palace to peasant hut. The scale of his achievement is enormous: five thousand meticulous drawings of regalia, icons, and weaponry; a

³ The New York Public Library purchased this portfolio of over three hundred watercolors in 1934, and it remains one of the Library’s treasures.

series of pioneering restoration projects; watercolor portraits of the peoples of European Russia; and experiments at design in an old Russian style. Through all this work, Solntsev created a vibrant and exotic visual language in which to express a newly crafted sense of national identity among those Slavic peoples living within the Russian Empire. In Solntsev's magnificent images, the grand imperial designs of Nicholas's reign were given their definitive visual identity. His ability to fashion fragments of that culture—medieval manuscript illuminations, Tatar helmets, onion domes—into a new visual language makes him an enormously important figure in the history of Russian art. One critic admitted: "All our contemporary Russian style is found in the drawings of Solntsev."⁴

In order to spread these ideas to the rest of Europe, between 1847 and 1853 Solntsev's drawings of the medieval artifacts in Moscow's Kremlin cathedrals and Armory Museum were published at the tsar's personal expense for the colossal sum of one hundred thousand rubles, in an edition of six hundred copies. *Antiquities of the Russian State (Drevnosti rossiiskago gosudarstva)*—a book mentioned in every one of the articles in this publication—consisted of six lavish volumes containing more than five hundred chromolithographs.⁵ It presents a carefully edited view of Russia, focusing on the power of church and crown, and was promoted abroad as the quintessential Old Russian culture. With their publication in an English-language and French translation as well, these drawings would shape the perception of Russian culture up to the present. These drawings represent a monument of Russian culture and to this day have no analog.

Like his counterparts in other countries, Solntsev went beyond simply recording historical fragments to show how they might form the basis for a revived national style in the decorative arts and architecture and inspire contemporary creations. In his design in the late 1840s for a dinner service to be used at the wedding of Nicholas I's son, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, Solntsev created the prototype for a distinctively Russian revival, using the historicist principles that dominated European design and architecture in the nineteenth century. Working in gold, silver, porcelain, and bronze, the commitment to historical accuracy required the precise transcription of each detail (for example, the helmet of the thirteenth-century Prince Aleksander Nevskii on the lid of the coffeepot). Yet the desire for a rich field of decorative and

⁴ Quoted in T. I. Dul'kina, "Svoia natsional'naia nota v keramike," *Russkii stil'. Sobranie Gosudarstvennogo istoricheskogo muzeia* (Moscow, 1998), 106.

⁵ The New York Public Library also has one of these rarities.

symbolic effects allowed for eclectic combinations of motifs from an array of disparate media and periods. The resulting blend was soon to be celebrated as the Old Russian style.

Beginning at mid-century with the advent of the World's Expositions, demand for nationally distinctive products arose on the international market, making the teaching of a distinctively Russian style essential in the nation's new schools of design. Exposure to the relics of bygone centuries stimulated the revival of native crafts like ceramics, enameling, filigree, and icon painting and fostered a coherent national style that would compete with West European products.

It was in the world of public spectacle and fantasy that Solntsev's Old Russian style found its natural home. Continuing the visual rhetoric of Nicholas I's reign, subsequent Russian rulers, especially Alexander III and Nicholas II, perpetuated the colorful pageantry of Moscow's Middle Ages as a symbol of imperial power to be flaunted in the face of a less exotic Europe. For instance, the ornament and opulent jewelry of Russian court dress was "widely acknowledged to be the most beautiful of all the European courts." The same sumptuous caftans, exotic headdresses, illuminated manuscripts, and gilded onion domes found their way into the fairytale world of childhood, delighting generations of Russian children (and not only them) with images of a land that existed only in the imagination.

This book concentrates almost exclusively on the Nicholaevan era that marked the apogee of Solntsev's creative endeavors. Once both Olenin and Nicholas died, he lost the most enthusiastic sponsors of his work as an artist-archaeologist and, while he remained active to the very end of his long life, his moment of fame had passed. Nonetheless, Solntsev's extraordinary career left an indelible mark on the image and perception of Russia in the modern era. Wherever visual information on Russia is needed, *Antiquities of the Russian State* remains the canonical source, at home and abroad. His staggering achievement in the scholarly documentation and preservation of historic artifacts, monuments, and costume rescued much of Russia's patrimony from oblivion. But perhaps Solntsev's most enduring legacy was the visual and imaginative framework he created for the many-layered notion of Russia. The window he opened onto Russia's medieval past became, by the end of the empire, the stage on which the idea of Russia was performed for an admiring world. In the lush sets and costumes of the famous Ballets Russes, we once again glimpse a Russian past as first visualized by Solntsev a century before.

The essays in this volume elaborate the sketch of Solntsev's life and legacy presented above. Marc Raeff's preface—one of the last pieces this great historian wrote before his untimely death—presents a grand sweep of European and Russian history that demonstrates the distant and proximate forces that shaped Solntsev's *Weltanschauung*. Richard Wortman's essay interweaves Nicholas I's desire for cultural and historical "parity with European monarchies" with Olenin's goal of fusing "the heritage of classical art with the motifs of Russia's own national traditions." As a result objects of antiquity were invested with "sacral status" and Solntsev acquired the patronage and guidance he needed to compile his masterpiece, *Antiquities of the Russian State*. Wortman makes the point that the "dominant role of the monarchy in shaping the historicist aesthetic" distinguishes Solntsev's work from his European counterparts. By contrast, Lauren M. O'Connell finds so many parallels of training, motivation, and work between Solntsev and Viollet-le-Duc that she sees them as dramatizing "the broadly cross-cultural nature of the nineteenth-century turn toward the medieval past" as well as the "will to use the printed image as a vehicle for shaping and promoting distinctive national identities." J. Robert Wright's article adds Pugin as an English counterpart to Solntsev and Viollet-le-Duc, with his architectural writings and projects that championed a Gothic Revival.

Four essays demonstrate Solntsev's enormous achievements in specific areas of art. Anne Odom focuses on the revolution he launched in design, introducing "a new, distinctively Russian, vocabulary of ornament" that had an impact in every area of the decorative arts. She demonstrates that the Russian style appeared just at the moment when the world's fairs became popular showcases for national art and thus insured its exposure world wide. Irina Bogatskaia details the work done on historic preservation during the first quarter of the nineteenth century and Solntsev's monumental role in publicizing, preserving, and restoring the antiquities and buildings of the Kremlin. Basing her work largely on Solntsev's unpublished diary, Marina Evtushenko discusses the artist's central importance in resurrecting the traditions of icon painting, which led to a veritable "renaissance" in this most venerated of Russian arts. Olenka Pevny recounts Solntsev's enormous influence in restoration work by comparing his techniques with those of Adrian Prakhov, who "followed in his footsteps" with two monumental commissions in Kiev, under the sponsorship of Alexander III: restoring the twelfth-century Church of St Cyril of Alexandria and decorating the newly-built Cathedral of St. Vladimir.

Two other essays deepen our understanding of the Nicholaevan era and the intellectual

climate surrounding Solntsev. Nathaniel Knight provides a vivid description of the development of ethnography in Russia, its strains and its struggles, and in particular the debate over the use of visual materials, whether it be of the Solntsev variety or the brand new medium of photography. Irina Reyfman recounts the “obsession with history” evident in the Russian prose of the Nicholaevan era, with writers turning out a slew of novels that take place in Kievan or Muscovite Russia and betraying varying degrees of knowledge or ignorance about the very material objects Solntsev was so busy drawing.

Visualizing Russia explores one country’s grand project to craft a national past in the course of the nineteenth century and the unprecedented power of visual images to bring that past to life for a broad audience.